

BALTIMORE CITY DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING
URBAN DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE REVIEW PANEL
MEETING MINUTES

Date: July 19, 2012

Meeting No: 150

Project: Rotunda Redevelopment

Phase: Schematic

Location: 40th Street/38th Street/ Elm Avenue – Hampden

PRESENTATION:

Chris Bell of Hekemian & Company, the developer, provided an update on the project since it was last brought to UDARP in 2006. Mr. Bell described the new project. Reduced in size and scope, the project no longer includes Giant Food as the key tenant. The new project is both smaller than previously designed and more horizontal than vertical in form. It includes 130,000 square feet of retail of which 20,000 square feet is intended to be a small grocery store (formerly 250,000 square feet, which included 70,000 square feet for Giant Food) and 375 apartments (formerly 375 apartments plus 40 condos, a hotel, and 22 townhouses). The 40' elevation change over the site is being addressed by placing the majority of the development on a podium or plaza level, with residential units on the lower end generally at grade (below the level of the plinth) and commercial space at the higher end. The retail space within the Rotunda, which is presently organized as an "interior mall," will be reconfigured to face outward at the building's perimeter. Five different construction methods are being used, ranging from concrete for the lower level garage (beneath the podium) and high-rise buildings to wood frame for the "townhouses."

Brian Reetz, landscape architect with Design Collective, the project architects, presented the landscape plan for the site. Key components of the design include improved parking, public spaces, a promenade leading to the apartment building's main entry, special pavers, foundation plantings that will enhance the streetscape of the townhouse-like flats, and a versatile parking lot area that can be closed off for pedestrian events.

Roger Kautz, project architect for Design Collective, explained the approach to the project's massing. With the goal of articulating the large project's form into smaller pieces, a variety of design approaches are proposed including two colors of brick, the use of a vertical form for the "townhouses" along the street, careful placement of regulating lines to achieve a more human scale, and deep setbacks at the roofs of the "townhouses."

Members of the community including Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke, Richard Kaminsin Chair of the Medfield), and Teresa Sneider representing Roland Park Place spoke in general support of the project, with the exception of making a strong objection by Mrs. Clarke to the abandonment of the interior mall concept. She stated that the present interior mall is an important neighborhood amenity for the senior members of the community and should not be eliminated. Mr. Kaminsky expressed his concern over traffic, while Mrs. Sneider supported the new plan for perimeter retail as she believed that it would bring vitality to the site.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE PANEL:

The Panel expressed support for the revised project scope and reduced scale that fits much better with the surrounding neighborhood than the previous scheme did, and found its proposed lower density satisfactory; however, it offers recommendations to improve the project's overall organization, design, and connectivity with the neighborhood. Recommendations of the Panel were:

1. The new plan is really just a reduction of the original plan. The reduced scale and density may consider a new plan that works more successfully with the new program.
2. The relationship of the green spaces to the parking lots should be reconsidered. Presently, the parking lots dominate the open space, making the green spaces seem incidental. The main public green space should read as a public "green" that has nearby parking, rather than parking with an island of grass at its center. Although presented as public amenities, these spaces are not well located within the overall project organization and are not sufficiently accessible to the public. Pedestrian as well as ADA access should be taken into account for these public spaces, especially along the edges of the site where the grade is steep.
3. The neighborhood around the Rotunda is known for its quirky character and this architectural scheme may be overly formal for this area and has the opportunity to be more special. While the design should relate to the Rotunda's architecture, it should not ignore completely the community's architectural aesthetic. A more architecturally diverse scheme (e.g. materials, colors, a variety of regulating lines) would seem to be a more successful direction for this project.
4. The exterior design of the buildings should give the solidity necessary to ensure that the buildings look like they come down to the ground. It is important to create a strong base that works with the plinth and the streetscape.
5. The front yards of the "townhouses" should relate to the street, with foundation plantings and sidewalks that add diversity and read similarly to the other blocks in the neighborhood.
6. The connectivity of the project to the adjacent streets is critical to the project's success. More attention should be paid to the perimeter parking lots on the north and west, as well as pedestrian accessibility to the site where the grade changes, and more obvious pedestrian connections between different buildings and uses.
7. Although the interior retail may not be successful from a commercial point of view, the existing interior "mall" works as a safe and comfortable public gathering space for the area's seniors. A space that similarly meets the community's needs to gather comfortably (and that is accessible to the retail) should be incorporated within the new plan.

PANEL ACTION:

The Panel recommends withholding schematic approval and looks forward to the Development Team's next presentation.

Attending:

Chris Bell – Hekemian & Company
Brian Reetz, Ryan Kautz, Shannon Ryan, Eric Wonsigl, Phil Raguindin – Design Collective
Al Barry, Nate Pretl – AB Associates
Bob McCarthy – Rolden
Vanessa Francis - JHU
Councilwoman Mary Pat Clark
Richard Kaminski – Medfield

Teresa Snyder, Roland Park Place
Ed Gunts – Baltimore Sun

M.J. Brodie – BDC

Ms. Eig*, Messrs. Burns, Cameron – Panel
Tom Stosur, Anthony Cataldo, Gary Cole, Melvin Hicks, Wolde Ararsa - Planning